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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 001910

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BA](#) [POL](#)

SUBJECT: BAHRAINI SHI'A CLERIC DETAINED AT AIRPORT,
PROTESTS ENSUE

REF: MANAMA 1773

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: Bahraini Shi'a Ayatallah Shaikh Mohamed Al-Sanad was detained four-five hours at Bahrain International Airport upon his return from Iran December 25, sparking a violent protest at the airport which resulted in damage to airport facilities and arrests of and injuries to protesters. Security forces reportedly held Shaikh Al-Sanad because of a statement he released from his office in Qom, Iran, questioning the legitimacy of the Bahraini regime. After originally referring the case to the Public Prosecutor, the government changed course and instead directed Shaikh Al-Sanad to the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, which has no mechanism for punishment. This decision, in addition to Shaikh Al-Sanad's more moderate statements to the press, represented a step back from confrontation on both sides. End summary.

2. (U) Bahraini Shi'a cleric Shaikh Mohamed Al-Sanad (born Khalid Hameed Mansour Sanad) was detained by Interior Ministry officials for suspicion of activities compromising national security December 25 at Bahrain International Airport upon his return from travel to Qom, Iran. As word leaked out about his detention at the airport, scores (reports range from 100 to more than 300) of supporters converged on the airport to stage a sit-in protest. Protesters clashed with riot police and threw airport seats through glass separators in the airport arrival lounge. Several protesters were reportedly arrested; others were injured and taken to the hospital. Shaikh Al-Sanad was later moved from the airport to the Public Prosecution building in Manama, held for questioning, and released in the early hours of December 26.

3. (U) Shaikh Al-Sanad's case was slated to be heard at the Public Prosecution building until Islamic Affairs Undersecretary Shaikh Farid Muftah instead set a meeting for December 27 at the Ministry of Islamic Affairs in an attempt to calm public emotions. In addition to meeting with Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Islamic Affairs Shaikh Abdullah Bin Khalid Al Khalifa, he was also set to meet with the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs. This decision took the case out of the courts, and suggested there would be no punishment for Shaikh Al-Sanad. On the evening of December 26, in anticipation of the meeting, Shaikh Al-Sanad declared that he would discuss with the Minister his displeasure about sectarian public school educational curricula and called for his supporters to embrace peaceful means of protest. A peaceful protest made up of approximately 80 of his supporters subsequently took place.

Post-Detention Interview

4. (U) In an interview December 26 with Arabic daily Al-Wasat, Shaikh Al-Sanad mollified his previous rhetoric, saying that he supports official government projects whose goal it is to resolve the suffering of Bahrainis, and he called on supporters to work within those projects. He said that he was in favor of participation in the election provided qualified and competent people are elected to put pressure on the government. He also urged his followers to restrict their activities to peaceful rallies related to political demands. These comments are a step back from the edge to which previous statements pressed.

Reactions to the Airport Disturbance

5. (U) Several groups commented on the events at the airport in the press. Al-Minbar Islamic Society (Muslim Brotherhood) affirmed the right of people to demonstrate, but said that the incident at the airport led to a serious security situation tarnishing Bahrain's image and setting back its democratic progress. The Bahrain Chamber of Commerce condemned the destruction of public property and affirmed that it would stand against anyone who threatens Bahrain's achievements. Bahrain Human Rights Society member Salman Kamaladdin affirmed that the incident was extremely unfortunate, giving the world a negative image of Bahrain. Shi'a religious scholar Shaikh Abdul Majeed Al-Asfoor and

Supreme Council on Islamic Affairs member Abdul Adheem Al-Muhtadi, both pro-government Shi'a leaders, said that although the violent crowd reaction was not justified, both sides bear some responsibility. They suggested that the GOB could have avoided instigating the crowd, yet still implemented the law, by waiting until Shaikh Al-Sanad reached home before taking him into custody. It is notable that all other Shi'a clerics and leaders (including Al-Wifaq president Shaikh Ali Salman, leading cleric Shaikh Issa Qassim, as well as Shi'a activists such as Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja) have been quiet on the incident.

Leading Up to the Arrest

16. (U) Shaikh Al-Sanad went into exile in the 1980's, first to London and then to Qom, until the King welcomed exiles to return to Bahrain in 2002 after the death of the late Emir, the King's father. While in exile, Al-Sanad studied at the House of Qom, an institution for Shi'a religious studies, and later became a religious professor in Qom before his return to Bahrain. Following the November 28 alleged abduction, beating and rape of Moussa Abd Ali (reftel), Shaikh Al-Sanad's branch office in Qom released a statement saying that the Bahraini regime is "suffering from a lack of legal legitimacy and a fear that the international community will find out." The statement went on to declare that the sole solution to problems in Bahrain is "a new constitution drafted by elected Bahrainis and monitored by the UN away from the interference of the current regime." Reportedly, it is this statement, and the fact that it was issued from Iran, that led to his detention at the airport.

17. (C) In a conversation with the Ambassador December 27, Minister of Industry and Commerce, and confidant of the King, Hassan Fakhro explained that Shaikh Al-Sanad is more radical than former Bahrain Center for Human Rights president Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja and former Al-Wifaq leader Shaikh Hassan Mushaima, who resigned from Al-Wifaq when it registered under the new political societies law. Fakhro said that Shaikh Al-Sanad has become more aggressive and belligerent in the past few months, going "over the top" in his claims that the government is illegitimate. Shaikh Al-Sanad is seen to be instigating a challenge to law and order in Bahrain and to the legitimacy of the state.

18. (U) In early November Shaikh Al-Sanad called for a public referendum organized by the UN to decide whether the Al Khalifa family rule should continue or not. At the same time he issued a fatwa in which he forbade the participation in parliament absent the intention to work for political reforms, which, he claimed, was nearly impossible in the present structure of the parliament under the constitution. His followers come primarily from the villages of Daih and Sanabis in the north central section of the island, west of Manama. It is rumored that some of the provocateurs during recent protests and violence hail from this area (reftel).

Comment

19. (C) Shaikh Al-Sanad's detention signals GOB sensitivity to statements originating in Iran. Although much of the content of his recent statement has been echoed by other clerics and opposition leaders in the recent past, Shaikh Al-Sanad's reputation for being confrontational and the fact that the statement came from his branch office in Qom, crossed the line from a GOB perspective. Now that the GOB has made its point, it appears to have stepped back from the confrontation, and Shaikh Al-Sanad appears to have done the same. The GOB decision to send the case to the Ministry of Islamic Affairs without formally charging Shaikh Al-Sanad shows its desire to show firmness yet not be provocative. The GOB has used this tactic to its advantage in the past.

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